

Teachers 'shut out' of school history debate

By Jewel Topsfield
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History teachers claim the Federal Government has shut them out of the development of a national Australian history curriculum for high schools, alleging the politically sensitive document is being "drafted in backrooms".

The History Teachers Association of Australia has written to federal Education Minister Julie Bishop and Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith, claiming it was "increasingly concerned" about what was happening with the proposed national curriculum.

The letter says the association, which represents 4000 teachers, feels it has been sidelined from the process.

"Our prime concern is about not being consulted about the draft curriculum," association president Nick Ewbank said. "There is no way we can develop a meaningful curriculum when it is drafted in backrooms."

The Government commissioned Monash University's Professor Tony Taylor to develop a model history curriculum for years 3 to 10 following the Australian history summit in Canberra last year.

However, The Age understands Prime Minister John Howard was unhappy with Professor Taylor's draft, which included questions and milestones, and history taught from indigenous perspectives.

"This is not what Howard wanted at all," a source told The Age. "Howard may like milestones but he certainly doesn't like questions. Too ambiguous. Too much debate. Too much thinking . . . he wanted just the facts, the dragnet version of history."

Mr Howard has repeatedly lamented that a "methodical narrative style" of teaching history has been abandoned and replaced by a "fragmented stew of themes and issues".

In June, the Government announced a four-member panel had been appointed to review the draft curriculum.

Members included right-wing political commentator Gerard Henderson, who has written a history of the Liberal Party, and conservative historian Professor Geoffrey Blainey - who in 1993 coined the phrase "black armband view of history" to describe the portrayal of European colonisation as shameful.

"Howard intervened to regain control and set up his panel of stooges whose job it is to dismantle Taylor's design," the source told The Age.

The other panel members were Australian National University senior fellow Nicholas Brown and NSW Board of Studies inspector Jennifer Lawless.

However, NSW Education Minister John Della Bosca barred Ms Lawless from being a member of the panel. Mr Della Bosca claimed the panel was biased.

Ms Lawless was eventually replaced by former Presbyterian Ladies College principal Elizabeth Ward.

A spokesman for Ms Bishop said the minister was considering the letter and would respond in due course.

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